

Hobbies

It's probably a fake steel cent, says an error-coin expert

By Roger Boye

Today's column answers questions from Chicago Tribune readers.

Q—I have what appears to be a 1983-D steel cent. A coin book says that starting in 1982, pennies have been made of copper-clad zinc. Could this be one that escaped the plating process? Is it rare?

K.H., Terre Haute, Ind.

A—Error-coin expert Alan Herbert suggests that a Lincoln cent missing its copper plating could be worth \$50. However, Herbert warns in a just-published book that authentication is a must because "fakes exist in quantity." Some chemicals can dissolve copper plating, exposing a cent's zinc core.

Q—I haven't found "S"-mint coins in my change since 1985. Why are they so scarce?

B.N., Chicago

A—In recent years, the San Francisco Mint has produced coins for U.S. proof sets. The

last circulation-bound cents bearing the "S" mint mark were dated 1974; the last nickels, 1970.



The San Francisco mint now only makes coins for proof sets.

Q—A private mint is selling medals made of German silver. Is that a valuable metal? What about sterling silver?

R.E., Des Plaines

A—German silver is a silver-white alloy containing copper, nickel, zinc and sometimes other cheap metals—but no silver. Sterling is 92.5 percent silver and 7.5 percent copper.

Q—I have an old newspaper article that claims 1960 "small-date" Lincoln cents could be worth \$1,000 or more. Is that true?

F.H., Hoffman Estates

A—"Small dates" sold for huge amounts soon after their discovery in 1960, but prices plummeted as collectors found large quantities of the minting variety. An uncirculated 1960 small-date cent now retails for about \$2 while a 1960-D small date goes for 15 cents or less. You may need a magnifying glass to distinguish a small date from the more common 1960 large-date cent.

Q—Do Columbian Exposition half dollars of 1892 and 1893 have good investment potential?

P.G., Chicago

A—Some dealers are buying

large quantities of the commemorative halves to use in promotions next year. Still, the coin remains relatively common among collectors, with circulated specimens selling for less than \$20 each. The halves memorialize the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

Q—After reading an item in your column, I bought a sheet of 16 uncut \$1 bills from the federal government. Surprise! The serial numbers on the bills aren't in order. For example, one bill is 99882635 and the next bill is 99887635. How much is this error worth?

W.R., Naperville

A—Federal Reserve notes in uncut sheets of currency aren't supposed to carry consecutive serial numbers. The numbers run consecutively from sheet to sheet, not bill to bill. In other words, the sheet on top of your sheet in the printing process contained bills with serial numbers 99882634 and 99887634. When individual bills are cut out of 1,000 16-note sheets, the printer creates 16 stacks of 1,000 consecutively numbered greenbacks.